

## Chapter IV Spiritual and Pastoral Assistance to the SFO

### 1. Assistance through the centuries

This topic has already been treated in Chapter II when speaking of the autonomy of the SFO (point 6). To introduce the special topic of assistance to the Secular Franciscan Order, we shall limit ourselves to recalling briefly how, over time, it has been expressed in some of the more important documents for the SFO.

#### 1.1. Development of relations between the SFO and the First Order and TOR

Ever since lay men and women were saying to the brothers, “Tell us what we can do to save our souls,”<sup>1</sup> Francis and his companions have been presented as servants who collaborated with those secular penitents who wanted to live the Gospel, giving them the necessary help: “Similarly, both married men and women given in marriage, unable to separate because of the law of matrimony, committed themselves to more severe penance in their own homes on the wholesome advice of the brothers.”<sup>2</sup>

In *Memoriale propositi* (1221), the visitor does not necessarily have to be a Friar Minor,<sup>3</sup> whereas the *Rule of Nicholas IV* (1289) states clearly that “the visitors and instructors should be taken from the Order of Friars Minor.”<sup>4</sup> In time, “after the Friars Minor had been divided through a difficult and fruitful history of tensions and reforms,”<sup>5</sup> the Holy See frequently stressed that assistance to the SFO is a task, duty and service of the First Franciscan Order (OFM, OFMConv, OFMCap) and Third Order Regular (TOR).<sup>6</sup>

Sixtus IV conferred this service on the Conventual general minister and provincial ministers and on the Observant general vicar and provincial vicars with the bull *Romani Pontificis Providentia*: “By the same authority, we also grant to the ministers, brothers and sisters of the Third Order, the permission and faculty of appointing the visitor or confessor from among the Conventual Friars Minor or those of the Observance, whichever pleases them most.”<sup>7</sup>

The Popes have insistently maintained this norm down through the ages. In the Rule of Leo XIII we read: “The visitors are to be chosen from the First Franciscan Order

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<sup>1</sup> AP 41; FA:ED II, 54.

<sup>2</sup> L3C 60; FA:ED II, 103; Cf. AP 41, 1 C 37.

<sup>3</sup> Cf. *Memoriale propositi*, n. 37.

<sup>4</sup> *Rule of Nicholas IV*, ch. XVI.

<sup>5</sup> J. Zudaire, *En seguimiento de Cristo con Francisco de Asís. Introducción a la Forma de Vida y Organización de la Orden Franciscana Seglar* (Madrid 1995) 229.

<sup>6</sup> The abbreviated expression “First Order and TOR” is also used to refer to the four religious Orders: OFM, OFMConv, OFMCap and TOR. But it should be remembered that in citations of the various documents quoted here we find these other expressions, which have the same meaning: “four religious Franciscan families,” or simply “four Franciscan families.”

<sup>7</sup> Bull *Romani Pontificis Providentia* (15 December 1471).

or from the Third Order Regular, and shall be appointed by the provincial or local superiors when requested.”<sup>8</sup>

An important step taken in the unity of criteria for service to the SFO was the letter that the four general ministers wrote to Pius XII, thanking him for the talk he had given to the Tertiaries in the Basilica of Saint Peter, a talk regarded as one of the landmarks in the age-old history of the Secular Franciscan Order. In it the Pope saw the SFO as “a select part in the peaceful secular army, which now as never before has openly declared itself for the defense and spread of the Kingdom of God in the world.”<sup>9</sup>

The *Constitutions* of the Third Order Secular of St. Francis, approved on 25 August 1957, state that the external government of the Third Order “corresponds to the Church and the four Franciscan Families.” They devote the entire the second section of Chapter III to the external government of the SFO where they say, among other things, that the spiritual direction and internal discipline depend on the superiors of the families of the First Order and the TOR.<sup>10</sup> But already here something new is being depicted when they speak of the possibility of enacting particular statutes, according to differences of time and place, strongly recommending that “these statutes should be drawn up by mutual agreement among the four Franciscan Families, in order to provide more effectively for the unity and harmony of the entire Third Order.”<sup>11</sup>

## 1.2. In the present legislation

The *Rule* of Paul VI (1978) takes a decisive step, moving from submission of the SFO to the First Order and the TOR to life-giving union with each other: “In various ways and forms but in life-giving union with each other, they intend to make present the charism of their common Seraphic Father in the life and mission of the Church.” After stressing the “organic union of all Catholic fraternities,”<sup>12</sup> the particular characteristics of their secular life and their autonomy, the *Rule* once again mentions “communion and co-responsibility” in the charism of the common Seraphic Father, calling for “suitable and well-prepared religious for spiritual assistance” from the four religious Franciscan families.<sup>13</sup>

The text of the Pauline *Rule* begins by recalling that the Secular Franciscans are not an appendage but an integral part of the Franciscan Family.<sup>14</sup> It ends with a request for spiritual assistance to the superiors of the First Order and the TOR,<sup>15</sup> as something flowing from one and the same charism.

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<sup>8</sup> *Regola di Leone XIII*, 3,3.

<sup>9</sup> G. Andreozzi, *Storia delle Regole e delle Costituzioni dell'Ordine Francescano Secolare*, Edizioni Guerra, Perugia 1988, p. 255.

<sup>10</sup> *Costituzioni del Terzo Ordine Francescano Secolare di San Francesco*, art. 94.

<sup>11</sup> *Rule SFO*, 1.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibidem*, 2.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibidem*, 26.

<sup>14</sup> Cf. *Ibidem*, 1.

<sup>15</sup> Cf. *Ibidem*, 26.

The *General Constitutions* of the SFO, definitively approved by the Congregation for Institutes of Consecrated Life and Societies of Apostolic Life, reaffirm and clarify these concepts in article 85: “As an integral part of the Franciscan Family and called to live the charism of Francis within the secular dimension, the SFO has particular and close relations to the First Order and the TOR.” By reason of these bonds, which have existed for centuries, the Church has entrusted to the superiors of the Franciscan religious Orders the *altius moderamen* mentioned in canon 303, in other words, the spiritual and pastoral care of the SFO.

## **2. From director to spiritual assistant**

### **2.1. Introduction**

The spiritual assistant is not the director of the fraternity, or its secretary, or its treasurer. He or she is a member of the fraternity council, with the right to vote on every question, except financial questions<sup>16</sup> and in elections.<sup>17</sup>

This view of assistance is effectively expressed by the general ministers when they say that “the work of the spiritual assistants, less far-reaching today in the area of direction and organization, can and must be more profound, as spiritual accompaniment and help in the formation of the brothers and sisters.” Recognition of the responsibility of the seculars must not be transformed into a passive attitude of “leave it to them,” but must be an active attitude of promotion and collaboration so that the seculars might realize their vocation and proper mission.<sup>18</sup>

### **2.2. Expectations and obstacles**

In an speech to the Council for the Laity in 1981, addressed to the ecclesiastical assistants of lay groups, Pope John Paul II urged them to be:

- builders of communion;
- educators in the faith;
- witnesses to the Absolute;
- true apostles of Jesus Christ;
- ministers of the sacramental life, especially the Eucharist;
- spiritual animators.

Similarly, the pastoral activity of the Franciscan religious, spiritual assistants to the SFO at all levels, must be characterized as:

- theological and spiritual direction;
- witness of fidelity to the Franciscan vocation;
- stimulus to create conditions of peace and justice, truth and love;

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<sup>16</sup> Cf. *Const.*, 90.2.

<sup>17</sup> Cf. *Statutes for Spiritual and Pastoral Assistance*, 12.3.

<sup>18</sup> Cf. *Lettera dei Quattro Ministri generali francescani sulla Vocazione e missione dei fedeli laici francescani nella Chiesa e nel mondo* (Roma, 18 agosto 1989) n. 49 c.

- help in reading the signs of the times;
- presentation of the spiritual dimension of the motives and objectives of the SFO.

But the spiritual assistants of the SFO are not just the “ecclesiastical assistants” of some lay group. For the Secular Franciscans they represent something more. They are a special channel through which passes the nourishment that should ensure “life-giving union with each other,” between the secular component and the religious components of the Family.

The goal of “life-giving union with each other” requires the removal, at all levels, of certain obstacles. These lie in a mentality that has been overcome, but whose roots are still deep. To go from one form of accompanying the Secular Franciscans to another is always hard:

- from “director” to “assistant”<sup>19</sup> (spiritual assistance, guidance by the “good shepherd” and not direction);
- from “commanding” to “serving”;
- from being “Father” who has the last word (even though there is only one Father, in heaven!) to being a member who collaborates with the council and its minister and should not be a substitute for them.<sup>20</sup>

### **2.2.1. Obstacles on the part of the seculars:**

- insufficient awareness of the dignity of the laity in the Church;
- limited knowledge of the true identity of the Secular Franciscan;
- “affective” dependence on the friar;
- mistaken “reverence” for religious, even in areas that have nothing to do with their status and role;
- idealization of the figure of the religious and fierce criticism when their limitations and weaknesses are perceived.

### **2.2.2. Obstacles on the part of the religious:**

- an “esprit de corps” with regard to one’s own Order, even when convinced of the unity of the SFO;
- a tendency to pursue and impose one’s own idea of the SFO instead of an awareness that the SFO has its own identity;
- a fear of losing the limelight if responsibilities are shared with the seculars.

To this must be added the excessively long tenure of some religious as assistants to the SFO, especially at the regional and local levels. As a result, even though they use the new terminology, these assistants are in fact still continuing their role of “direction.” This prevents the Secular Franciscans from ceasing to be a devotional group or mere collaborators of the assistant or parish priest, and not allowing them to live fully their

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<sup>19</sup> Cf. *Const.*, 85.2.

<sup>20</sup> Cf. *Ibidem*, 86.2.

own form of gospel life, with all their commitments to mission.<sup>21</sup> Too much time spent in the office of assistant brings with it, among other things, a negative charge of weariness, repetition and lack of creativity, which often seriously damage the life of the SFO fraternity. Sometimes this can happen even in “collegiality,” when for one reason or another the established rotation is not followed and they do not work as a team.

These difficulties are not insurmountable obstacles. They represent a path on which to move forward together and are subjects for reflection, which can be of help in providing better assistance to the SFO. They should lead to a better knowledge of the Franciscan Order which, with the First Order and the TOR, shares the same charism of Francis, but in a secular expression.

If at times the provincial ministers or the assistants are ignored by the Secular Franciscans, this is not the fault of the Secular Franciscan Order or the Church, which recognizes it as an international and public association of the faithful. It could be the fault of individual Secular Franciscans who are arbitrarily interpreting the innovations that have taken place, or it could be the fault of the provincial ministers and assistants themselves, who do not know the Church’s legislation concerning the SFO or are unwilling to enforce it.

It can happen that the Secular Franciscans are opposed to a spiritual assistant because he acts like the old spiritual director of a Third Order Fraternity, thinking that the local SFO Fraternity “belongs” to him or to his Order. A priest will certainly meet opposition if he has failed to grasp the difference between a spiritual director of the old Third Order and a spiritual assistant of today’s Secular Franciscan Order. But this does not give the Secular Franciscans the right to exclude him from meetings of the fraternity council. If they have problems with him, they should report their difficulties to the SFO regional council, where this exists, or if not to the national council, either through the regional assistant or directly. The general assistant should get involved only if the national council is unable to resolve a serious problem, or if the case has to be brought to the attention of the president of the international council.

### **3. Spiritual assistance in the SFO General Constitutions**

#### **3.1. Definition**

Compared to the *Rule*, the *Constitutions* describe more fully and completely the figure of the assistant as “the person designated by the competent major superior to carry out this service for a specific fraternity of the SFO.”<sup>22</sup>

The description does not mention priestly status, since the specific task is not sacramental assistance but rather spiritual assistance. This allows any brother of the First Order or the TOR, whether a priest or not, to assist an SFO fraternity, as long as he is

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<sup>21</sup> Cf. *Rule SFO*, 4; *Const.*, 1.3.

<sup>22</sup> Cf. *Const.*, 89.2.

capable and well-prepared.<sup>23</sup> In case no friar is available for spiritual assistance to an SFO fraternity, the major superiors are allowed, after hearing from the council of the fraternity, to entrust this responsibility to “religious brothers or sisters of other Franciscan institutes; diocesan clerics or other persons, specially prepared for such service, who are members of the SFO; other diocesan clerics or non-Franciscan religious,”<sup>24</sup> provided they possess the necessary qualifications of ability and competency.

The task of the assistant is “spiritual assistance to the fraternities at the various levels,”<sup>25</sup> communicating “Franciscan spirituality” and cooperating “in the initial and continuing formation of the brothers and sisters.”<sup>26</sup> But animation and guidance of the fraternity at every level is the task of the respective council, of which the spiritual assistant is a member “by right, with vote,” except in financial questions.<sup>27</sup>

### **3.2 Role of the major superiors**

The responsibility of the major superiors of the First Order and the TOR in spiritual assistance is very important. Besides canonical establishment, spiritual animation and visitation of the local fraternities,<sup>28</sup> they are asked to keep themselves informed “on the spiritual assistance given to the SFO,” to see to it that “their own religious are interested in the SFO and that capable and well-prepared persons are appointed for the service of spiritual assistance.”<sup>29</sup> Their appointment of capable and well-prepared friars for assistance arises from the concern they have for the Secular Franciscans, their spirituality, their mission and their task in society and the Church. Today many Franciscan religious are attracted to other ecclesial groups or movements, not realizing that the Secular Franciscan are companions in life and mission in the secular arena, called like them to the same gospel charism.

The ministers and custodes, as major superiors, are invited to maintain a dialogue or exchange of opinions with the respective SFO councils and ministers, as a sign of union and co-responsibility, when they are asked to propose candidates for assistance. This exchange of opinions will be a sign that the nature and mission of the SFO has been understood, while the foundations of collegiality at all levels are strengthened.

The sense of family between the SFO, the First Order and the TOR is also manifested by going through the process of appointing the spiritual assistant together. The SFO council solicits and requests the assistant,<sup>30</sup> the major superior (general or provincial minister) hears the council, and the two dialogue to reach the best consensus for assistant to the fraternity concerned: “The competent major superior, having heard the council of the fraternity concerned, appoints the assistant according to the norms of the

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<sup>23</sup> Cf. *Ibidem*, 89.3.

<sup>24</sup> Cf. *Ibidem*, 89.4.

<sup>25</sup> Cf. *Ibidem*, 86.1.

<sup>26</sup> Cf. *Ibidem*, 90.1.

<sup>27</sup> Cf. *Ibidem*, 90.2.

<sup>28</sup> Cf. *Ibidem*, 88.2.a-b.

<sup>29</sup> Cf. *Ibidem*, 88.2.c.

<sup>30</sup> Cf. *Ibidem*, 91.1.

Constitutions and of the *Statutes for Spiritual and Pastoral Assistance to the Secular Franciscan Order*.”<sup>31</sup>

### 3.3 Collegial assistance

The subject of collegiality in assistance to the SFO fraternities at the international, national and regional levels deserves special consideration.<sup>32</sup>

The *Statutes for Assistance*, which are “common to the four religious Orders (OFM, OFMConv, OFMCap, TOR),” state in Article 3.2 that the service of assistance “must be performed collegially at all levels above the local level.” For local fraternities it does not speak of collegial assistance, since a local fraternity is normally assisted by a single religious Order.

According to the 2000 *General Constitutions* of the SFO, collegiality in the spiritual and pastoral care of the SFO, which is entrusted by the Church to the First Order and the TOR, applies explicitly to:

- the general ministers;<sup>33</sup>
- the major superiors who have jurisdiction in the same territory, national or regional;<sup>34</sup>
- the general, national and regional assistants.<sup>35</sup>

The *General Constitutions* express this collegial activity in a much clearer and more evident way: “For all that concerns the SFO as a whole, the *altius moderamen* must be exercised by the general ministers collegially.”<sup>36</sup>

If the general ministers exercise their service collegially, their immediate delegates, the general spiritual assistants,<sup>37</sup> in giving collegial assistance to the Secular Franciscan Order, should be in agreement with the mind of the Conference of the General Ministers of the First Order and the TOR.

This Conference of the four general ministers has been recognized by the Congregation for Institutes of Consecrated Life and Societies of Apostolic Life (CICLSAL) as a juridic person of pontifical right by Decree of 17 February 2003 (Prot. n. 38051/2003). This gives further juridical weight to what is decided concerning collegial assistance to the SFO. Indeed, Article 6 of the *Statutes* approved by the same Decree inserts at the end: “To perform for the Secular Franciscan Order the collegial service of *altius moderamen*, entrusted by the Church to the four Orders.”

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<sup>31</sup> Cf. *Ibidem*, 91.3.

<sup>32</sup> Cf. *Ibidem*, 90.3a-c.

<sup>33</sup> Cf. *Ibidem*, 87.1.

<sup>34</sup> Cf. *Ibidem*, 88.5; 91.2b-c.

<sup>35</sup> Cf. *Ibidem*, 90.3a-c.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibidem*, 87.1.

<sup>37</sup> The same thing can and must be said for the national and regional assistants with regard to their provincial ministers or custodes.

Similarly, the assistants form the so-called Conference of Spiritual Assistants (CSA).

The creation of the Conference of Spiritual Assistants is required by the very unity of the SFO, as well as by the fact that communication and participation will make the assistance more productive and creative. In order to achieve creation of the Conference of Assistants, animation by the provincial ministers of the First Order and the TOR is appropriate.

The change from general commissaries and general assistants, and especially to collegial assistance by the Conference of Spiritual Assistants, has been and continues to be marked by persistence and good cooperation, in which people are working and studying collegially, in accord with the *Constitutions* of the SFO: “The general assistants give their service to the Presidency of the International Council of the SFO, form a conference, and collegially see to the spiritual assistance to the SFO as a whole.”<sup>38</sup>

Assistance, inasmuch as it is communion and co-responsibility, is not a finished or closed subject, but is open-ended and capable of growth and creativity among the components of the Franciscan Family.

If on the general level collegial assistance is very well established and organized, it is necessary to work so that this collegiality, on the national and regional levels, is not just a theory but a living reality. Spiritual assistance to the SFO must respect its unity, its organization and its organs of government.

### **3.4 Role of the spiritual assistants**

According to the *Rule* (n. 26), the proper role of the spiritual assistant is to provide “spiritual assistance.” He or she is appointed by one of the four religious Orders as a sign of communion and co-responsibility. Articles 85-91 of the *General Constitutions* describe this role further. It contains two main elements:

- witness of Franciscan spirituality and of the fraternal affection of the religious;<sup>39</sup>
- collaboration in the initial and continuing formation of the brothers and sisters.<sup>40</sup>

Nowhere does it mention or indicate that the spiritual assistant is in any way the “superior” of the SFO. Neither the general minister of the friars, nor the provincial ministers, have a role of direct authority in the structures of the SFO. The *altius moderamen* over the SFO, which is entrusted to them, does not involve power or control. Rather it is a guarantee of the fidelity of the SFO to the Franciscan charism, of its communion with the Church and of its union with the Franciscan Family.<sup>41</sup>

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<sup>38</sup> *Const.*, 90.3a.

<sup>39</sup> Cf. *Ibidem*, 89.3.

<sup>40</sup> Cf. *Ibidem*, 90.1.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibidem*, 85.2.

Therefore we can conclude that the spiritual assistants have no authority in the sense of a right to direct the members of the SFO. On the contrary, they assist the Secular Franciscans, sharing their own Franciscan life with them, preaching to them not so much with words as with the example of their life. The spiritual assistants, in light of the SFO *Rule* and *General Constitutions*, are not supposed to tell the Secular Franciscans *how* they should live, unless they actually adopt and propagate actions obviously contrary to the teachings of the Church (not just contrary to the personal theological opinions or the liturgical preferences), or in ways not in conformity with the directives given to the SFO in the *Rule*, the *Constitutions*, and the *Ritual*.

### 3.5 Pastoral and spiritual role

In order to better understand the *altius moderamen* or pastoral ministry to the Secular Franciscan Order, it is necessary to understand what a “pastor” is. In the Catholic Church, we ordinarily understand a “pastor” as a person “who is responsible for all that takes place in a diocese or parish.” In the Church, it also refers to the priest who is charged with representing the authority of the Church in Catholic associations. Naturally, more precise distinctions about the role of a pastor are found in the law of the Church.

However, for spiritual assistants to the Secular Franciscans, the role of pastor is better described by the title of “spiritual assistant.” Assistant, from the Latin verb *adsistere*, means to stand beside, to stand near, to be present, to protect, to support, to help by means of one’s own active participation. An assistant is one who is called, because of his or her competence, to help the person in charge or chief officer, who, in the case of the SFO, is the council with the minister at the various levels.

As friars, we should limit ourselves to “assisting” the Secular Franciscans; we are not responsible for “directing” them. In fact we are not even the sole spiritual experts, since the entire fraternity is responsible for the spiritual life of each of its members.<sup>42</sup> It is essential to acknowledge this way of understanding and this way of being a pastor, and to act accordingly.

This ministry is an integral part of our common Franciscan vocation, which we share with the SFO. A very important point is that we are not working for the SFO; we assistants are working for our Orders, carrying out a task entrusted to us by the Church and which belongs to us as friars. Therefore we should not even expect any remuneration from the SFO. If, out of a sense of family, the Seculars also want to help us financially, we can only be grateful to them for this.

Article 26 of the *Rule* of the Secular Franciscan Order is rich in content when it asks the superiors of the four Franciscan families for suitable religious for assistance to the fraternities at the various levels, as a sign of communion and co-responsibility:

- a sign of communion in one and the same charism, which gives life to the whole Franciscan Family, and which is understood only in face of the plurality of

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<sup>42</sup> *Ibidem*, 37.2, 3.

manifestations of this charism: men religious, women religious and laity. A charism of many colors for the good of the Church: “Now there are varieties of gifts, but the same Spirit... To each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good” (1 Cor 12:4-7).

- a sign of co-responsibility, in the life (not in the government) of the Secular Franciscan Order, since as the *Constitutions* rightly emphasize, “This service of the religious ministers completes but does not substitute for the secular councils and ministers to whom belong the guidance, co-ordination and animation of the fraternities at the various levels.”<sup>43</sup>

The pastoral visit and the chapter of elections, which we shall speak of later, are special moments in which spiritual assistance, and especially pastoral service, are exercised more concretely.<sup>44</sup>

### 3.6. Requirements of the assistant

The chief requirements of an assistant are that he or she be suitable and well-prepared.<sup>45</sup> Then, in the context of this suitability, assistants are asked to stand beside the laity, our Secular Franciscans, who have a maturity and responsibility in the Church, as the Second Vatican Council says: “Priests should confidently entrust to the laity duties in the service of the Church, giving them freedom and opportunity for activity and even inviting them, when opportunity offers, to undertake projects on their own initiative.”<sup>46</sup> And, paraphrasing a text from *Christifideles laici*, it speaks of helping our Secular Franciscan brothers and sisters to become increasingly conscious, not only of belonging to an Order, the Secular Franciscan Order, but of themselves *being* their Order, in communion with the charism of the brothers of the First Order and the TOR. They *are* the Secular Franciscan Order: “Therefore, they [the laity] in particular, ought to have an ever-clearer consciousness not only of belonging to the Church, but of being the Church.”<sup>47</sup>

Like the theme of autonomy, the theme of the unity of the SFO is also found again in the expressions of our Franciscan maturity and minority. For this reason it seems fitting to quote some lines from a letter sent by Fr. Agostino Gardin, OFMConv, acting president of the Conference of General Ministers, to all provincial ministers of the First Order and TOR in Italy concerning the situation of the Italian SFO. After asking them “not to leave this situation unresolved, even though it is difficult,” Fr. Agostino added a reference to the Apostolic Exhortation *Vita Consecrata*: “The Church entrusts to communities of consecrated life the particular task of spreading the spirituality of communion, first of all in their internal life and then in the ecclesial community, and even beyond its boundaries...”<sup>48</sup>

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<sup>43</sup> *Ibidem*, 86.2.

<sup>44</sup> In this same Chapter, paragraphs 5.4-5.7, and also 6.4.

<sup>45</sup> Cf. *Const SFO*, 87.3; *Rule SFO*, 26.

<sup>46</sup> Decree *Presbyterorum Ordinis*, 9.

<sup>47</sup> CL, 9.

<sup>48</sup> VC, 51; Cf. also nos. 41, 45, 46, 47.

Only a positive response of animation and accompaniment in the pursuit of unity will indicate that we have understood that the SFO is secular, which is “the special characteristic of the laity.”<sup>49</sup> And so, in the great Franciscan Family, “the sharing of the lay faithful has its own manner of realization and function, which, according to the Council, is ‘properly and particularly’ theirs. Such a manner is designated with the expression ‘secular character.’”<sup>50</sup> And for Secular Franciscans it is also manifested in the unity of all the members of the Secular Franciscan Order.

#### **4. Assistant to the local fraternity**

##### **4.1 In general**

According to the *Statutes for Assistance*, the local assistant:

- is appointed by the major superior, according to the law of his own Order, after hearing the council of the fraternity concerned (Art. 23.1);
- fosters communion within the fraternity and between the fraternity and the First Order or the TOR. In harmony with the guardian or local superior, the assistant sees to it that a real life-giving union exists between the religious fraternity and the secular fraternity. He or she fosters the active presence of the fraternity in the Church and in society (Art. 23.2);
- together with the fraternity council, the local assistant is responsible for the formation of the candidates and expresses his or her assessment of each of the candidates before profession (Art. 24.1);
- together with the minister, the assistant discusses with the brothers or sisters in difficulty, who want to retire from the fraternity or who act in serious opposition to the *Rule* (Art. 24.2).

The spiritual assistant plays an important and sensitive role in the meetings of the fraternity and its council. The assistant’s specific area is spiritual: to foster communion with the Church, to bear witness to Franciscan spirituality, to co-operate in formation and to nourish the Christian life of the fraternity. The assistant’s contributions to the meetings, those of the fraternity as well as those of the council, should be related chiefly to this specific area. Naturally, this calls for tact and spiritual maturity to know when to keep quiet and give priority to the secular leaders in the coordination and animation of the fraternity.

Two extremes should be avoided during meetings:

- First, the temptation to lead the meeting in person, especially if the secular officers appear weak or lack formation.
- Second, the temptation to let things go and limit oneself strictly to the dictates of one’s duty, or even to lose interest in the fraternity.

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<sup>49</sup> LG, 31.

<sup>50</sup> CL, 15.

The specific role of the spiritual assistant will vary according to the different types of meetings in which he or she participates: council meetings or fraternity meetings, meetings focusing on spirituality, formation, organization, recreation etc. However it remains true that the spiritual assistant should always play that role in the context of that “life-giving union with each other” which arises from belonging to the same family, even though in different ways.

#### **4.2 In council meetings**

The spiritual assistant:

- is by right, with vote, a member of the council of the fraternity which he or she serves, and collaborates with it in all activities,<sup>51</sup> taking part in its meetings and activities in accordance with the law proper to the SFO;
- acts with respect for the responsibilities and role of the seculars, giving them priority with regard to the guidance, coordination and animation of the fraternity.

The participation of the spiritual assistant in the meetings and activities of the local council will vary according to the concrete needs and circumstances of the fraternity. The assistant will play a more active role in the council meetings of a newly established or re-activated fraternity than in one already fully established and active. But it remains true that the assistant should always give the seculars priority with regard to the guidance, coordination and animation of the fraternity. His or her role is always spiritual: to nourish the Christian and Franciscan life of the fraternity.

Council meetings will focus on various elements of fraternity life: Franciscan and Christian life, apostolic and charitable activities, initial and continuing formation, fraternal life and contacts between members. The topics to be treated will be many: preparation for fraternity meetings, planning and evaluating fraternity activities, evaluation of candidates for admission to the Order or to profession, preparations for the chapter or special fraternity meetings, formation courses for the officers, actual and prospective, or for members of the fraternity. The role of the spiritual assistant in council meetings is normally limited to active participation in the discussion, offering suggestions based on his or her Franciscan and religious sensibility.

It is important that council meetings be well-prepared and have a clear agenda. The assistant should also be prepared to help the secular councilors with his or her spiritual intuition regarding the topics to be discussed. Prior contact between the minister of the fraternity and the assistant will be useful for passing on information and ensuring better participation during the council meeting.

Council meetings can be structured in different ways, depending on the main topics to be discussed. But it is important to follow a basic framework, which could be as follows:

1. Opening prayer (Assistant)

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<sup>51</sup> *Const.*, 90.2.

2. Agenda and modifications (Minister)
3. Minutes of the last meeting (Secretary)
4. Spiritual reflection (Assistant)
5. Reports (Officers)
6. Topics on the agenda (All)
7. Conclusion (Minister)

This structure can be modified depending on the situation and the topics to be covered.

The opening prayer (no. 1) could be inspired by the prayers suggested in the *Ritual* for fraternity meetings (Part II, Chapter 1). It can be just a simple opening prayer, or it can be extended by recitation of some part of the Liturgy of the Hours.

In a meeting for the admission of candidates to profession, the reports (no. 4) will consist of an evaluation of each candidate by the person responsible for formation and by the spiritual assistant, followed by discussion and a secret vote.<sup>52</sup>

In other cases the reports could be the treasurer's financial report or reports by officers responsible for the fraternity's charitable and apostolic activities.

In a meeting for planning fraternity activities, the reports could be omitted in order to devote more time to the work of programming or planning these activities, as provided in the agenda.

The spiritual reflection (no. 6) could also take different forms. It can be very short, just a moment of silence followed by a prayer. It can be longer, taking the form of a deeper reflection on some aspect of Franciscan spirituality or on a spiritual text. The spiritual reflection can be given by the the assistant alone, as a conference or a reading followed by meditation. It can also take the form of a common reflection following the "SJA" model (See, Judge, Act),<sup>53</sup> with the active participation of all those present.

The conclusion (no. 7) can be a simple formal conclusion by the minister, or a time to make decisions or to list decisions made, or to fix the day and place for the next council meeting. The whole meeting can be concluded as suggested in the *Ritual*.<sup>54</sup>

A smooth-running council meeting needs, on the one hand, an agenda for dealing with things, and on the other, creative flexibility in following it. An agenda facilitates regularity and consistency in meetings. Creative flexibility in following it makes it possible to consider problems in various ways and explore new solutions to routine problems.

### **4.3. The "SJA" method**

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<sup>52</sup> Cf. *Ibidem*, 41,1.

<sup>53</sup> See below, 4.3.

<sup>54</sup> Part II, Chapter 1.

The method offers a simple and flexible outline for formation meetings or meetings to study a topic together. The method is used for rural conscientization courses in Latin America, for managerial training in Europe and the United States, and in group dynamics sessions. The method produces best results in small groups of not more than fifteen members. Another possibility is to limit active participation to a restricted number of persons, a panel to whom the others listen. Normally there is no need to prepare specific questions to be answered, unless one wants to direct the discussion toward a certain goal.

The meeting starts with the reading of a written text or the telling of a relevant story. The reading or story is followed by a short period of silence to give each one a chance for personal reflection on the topic. After the reading or story, followed by silence, come the three steps: **See, Judge, Act**.

#### **4.3.1 See**

We try to see, to understand or grasp the contents of the topic. Each participant tries to express what he or she has understood, what the text or story is trying to say, as he or she has understood it. It is an analysis done together on the objective meaning of the text or story. One tries to understand the topic as completely as possible. Normally each participant is given a chance to express what he or she has understood of the topic. The order of the contributions can be left free or follow a fixed pattern. This phase can be summarized by the question: *What does the text or story mean?*

#### **4.3.4 Judge**

After deepening our understanding of the topic, we start to judge the significance of the topic for the life of the participants. Each participant asks how his or her life relates to the topic, how he or she feels affected by the topic, what impact the topic has on his or her private or social life. The topic is judged in relation to one's life, but one's life is also judged in light of the topic. The SFO *Rule* indicates this process as going from the Gospel to life and from life to the Gospel. This phase can be summarized by the question: *What does the text or story invite us to do?*

#### **4.3.3 Act**

In the third phase we move to practice, trying to draw practical conclusions for our life. Each participant asks him- or herself what he or she can or should do to answer the topic's invitation, what can change in one's life in order to follow its appeal. We can also draw common conclusions, make decisions needed to act upon the ideas or proposals identified in the preceding phase. This phase can be summarized by the question: *What should we do to act on this text or story?*

The meeting ends by recalling briefly the process gone through. The topic, the invitation it presents, and the actions to be taken are summarized in a few words.

## 4.4 In fraternity meetings

### 4.4.1 Contents

Fraternity meetings are family meetings, of brothers and sisters, of people who want to live the Gospel after the manner of Saint Francis of Assisi. Normally they consist of four elements: prayer, formation, activities and fraternization.<sup>55</sup>

- a. Common prayer unites the brothers and sisters in praising God, our Father in heaven. It can be a eucharistic celebration, with homily and song, or a celebration of the Liturgy of the Hours, or another form of common prayer.
- b. Formation allows the members to develop their spirituality, their human, Christian, gospel and Franciscan life. It can consist of a conference by the spiritual assistant, a reading of some formative text, or a shared reflection on a spiritual topic.
- c. The apostolic and charitable activities of the members are shared in such a way as to be activities of the fraternity and not just of isolated individuals. Fraternity meetings allow all the members to become aware of what the others are doing individually and to involve themselves actively in the commitments made by the fraternity as such. This part of the meeting can be sharing the work of the other members, an evaluation of the work done so far, a division of work, an endorsement of the commitments already made, a suggestion of initiatives to be undertaken.
- d. Fraternization allows all the members to become truly brothers and sisters, to experience that fraternity lived by Saint Francis. It can simply be a moment of being together, to compare notes, to get to know one another better, to meet one another. It can be accompanied by refreshments or a by a potluck meal.

Because the fraternity meetings are meetings of brothers and sisters, every meeting should be characterized by these four elements: prayer, formation, activity and fraternization. It is not necessary, of course, to always give the same importance to each element. During spiritual retreats, the element of prayer will be the most important. In formation meetings, the formative element will take first place. A meeting of the fraternity to evaluate work done or to plan apostolic and charitable activities will be centered on these. And when the fraternity goes on an outing or organizes a pilgrimage, the element of recreation will predominate. It should be remembered, however, that all four elements are essential for the life of the fraternity and should be present in one form or another.

It is important that the contents of the individual elements show a dynamic continuity that can be perceived by the members of the fraternity. Continuity preserves a

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<sup>55</sup> Cf. *Rule SFO*, 5; *Ritual*, Part II, Preliminary notes 4.

connection with the past, with the customs and traditions of the fraternity. Dynamism tends toward the future, enters the “road to renewal,”<sup>56</sup> sustains an “open and trusting dialogue of apostolic effectiveness and creativity,”<sup>57</sup> and helps the brothers and sisters to be “witnessing to the good yet to come.”<sup>58</sup>

Dynamic continuity of contents means concretely that the assistant’s interventions should be linked to each other. They should be based on knowledge and convictions already present, while fully open to the impulse of the Holy Spirit who inspires the brothers and sisters to “strive for perfect charity in their own secular state” (*Rule 2*). One should strive for a balance between tradition and innovation, between continuity and creativity, between fidelity and openness to the Holy Spirit. An assistant who is afraid of “dangerous novelties” can bind the fraternity to the past and render it incapable of understanding the signs of the times. Similarly, an assistant who is in love with “liberating innovation” can unleash in the fraternity an unbridled curiosity that prevents it from bearing fruits of patience and perseverance.

#### **4.4.2 Structure**

The fraternity meetings can be structured in various ways, keeping in mind here too the need for dynamic continuity. The meetings of the same fraternity can be structured differently depending on the time, alternating from week to week (e.g., the first week a eucharistic celebration, the second week a formation meeting, the third week planning the work, the fourth week spiritual recollection). The fraternity can also establish, “under the guidance of the one council, sections or groups which gather members sharing particular needs.”<sup>59</sup> Obviously, the meetings for each group can be structured differently according to the various needs, while keeping a fixed rhythm for the meetings of the whole fraternity.

It will be useful to describe various types of fraternity meetings.

*With a special Eucharistic celebration:*

1. Opening prayer (Minister)
2. Formation (Assistant - Officer)
3. Eucharist (Assistant)
4. Evaluation and planning of activities (Officers)
5. Fraternization (All)

*With the parish Eucharistic celebration:*

1. Opening prayer (Minister)
2. Formation (Assistant - Officer)
3. Evaluation and planning of activities (Officers)
4. Eucharist with the parish community (All)
5. Short fraternization (All)

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<sup>56</sup> *Rule SFO*, 7.

<sup>57</sup> *Ibidem*, 6.

<sup>58</sup> *Ibidem*, 12.

<sup>59</sup> *Const.*, 34.

*or:*

1. Eucharist with the parish community (All)
2. Formation (Assistant - Officer)
3. Evaluation and planning of activities (Officers)
4. Fraternalization (All)
5. Concluding prayer (Minister)

*Without Eucharistic celebration:*

1. Liturgy of the Word or of the Hours (Minister)
2. Formation (Assistant - Officer)
3. Evaluation and planning of activities (Officers)
4. Fraternalization (All)
5. Concluding prayer (Minister)

Each element can vary depending on circumstances. The eucharistic celebration can be simple, without songs, or solemn, with a short homily or a longer sermon. The formative moment can consist of a reading or a conference given by the assistant, or a sharing of life experiences by the members. It can also be an in-depth reflection on a text by all the members together, facilitated by the assistant. The evaluation and planning of activities can be a simple communication of things to be done together, or a common evaluation of work done with a view to future activities. The fraternalization can be a brief moment to say good-bye or a longer get-together. The concluding prayer can be a spontaneous prayer by the minister, a written formula, or a simple blessing by the assistant.

#### **4.5 In the formation of the fraternity**

We have to admit that in the past the Secular Franciscan Order was not very attentive to the formation of its leaders, leaving that task to the assistant and occasional experts. This situation is now undergoing a radical change, a development that is also required by the changing times into which we are moving. Above all, it is demanded by the new dimension of responsibility to which the lay faithful are called within the Church and society. However, this change must be made with intelligence and caution. Let no one think that replacing the friar with the secular will solve everything. What we are talking about is a joint task patiently carried out, where each one pulls his own weight.

In this paragraph we consider the sensitive tasks and responsibility of the assistant as formator in the local fraternity. It must be borne in mind that the assistant's role becomes even more significant today when we remember that Christian values are losing a lot of ground, while other values not always in tune with the following of Christ are gaining in strength.

To speak of the spiritual assistant as being responsible for formation is not easy, particularly in view of all that the assistant is involved in, and the relationships that have to be maintained, e.g., with the minister, with the council, with the staff of the formation team and with all the members of the fraternity, both as a group and as individuals.

We are not dealing here with the requirements for developing the role of formator or the preparation needed. We confine ourselves to a consideration of the assistant as a leader entrusted with the task of collaborating in the sensitive area of formation. Hence we will deal with the assistant's relationships with the other leaders.

The assistant is by a right a member of the council; his or her role consists in being the privileged formator of the entire fraternity. The *General Constitutions* say: "The principal task of the assistant is to communicate Franciscan spirituality and to cooperate in the initial and continuing formation of the brothers and sisters."<sup>60</sup> The assistant must be fully aware of this fact in order to convey a good understanding of "things Franciscan" with the presence and competence required.

- The assistant participates (even if this is not always necessary) in the fraternity meetings, being actively present and alert to the dynamics of the group.
- The assistant lives, expresses and facilitates that life-giving union with each other that arises from belonging to the same Franciscan Family, even if in different ways. Respectful of the role of each one, the assistant is concerned with pastoral and spiritual formation, as well as the fraternity's liturgical and sacramental life.
- The assistant ensures the biblical-theological content of formation. The assistant speaks of God and is sensitive to such spiritual aspects as prayer, listening to the Word, and spiritual direction.
- As witness to fraternal life, the assistant becomes the bond of unity within the fraternity, with the community of the friars, with other Franciscan religious communities in the area and with the ecclesial community.
- The assistant is on the lookout so that the fraternity does not close in on itself and become a "parish group."
- The assistant enlivens the fraternity's interest in the life of the local Church through collaboration in diocesan and parochial initiatives.
- Being the spiritual and "prophetic" counselor of the fraternity government, it falls to the spiritual assistant to encourage all towards "unity in charity" and a *sensus ecclesiae*.

The assistant is not to be the director or factotum, yet he is not simply a priest or chaplain (according to the terminology used by some Church groups) who limits his presence to celebrating the Eucharist and administering the sacraments. Like all the council members, the assistant has the duty to serve as best he or she can, as the *Rule* requires. The assistant is pastor, guide and teacher, and must get to know the brothers and sisters individually, in order to form them by harmonizing the education and abilities of each so that no one remains isolated or on the fringes. This is an in-depth work, carried on discreetly and quietly, yet very effectively for the growth of the fraternity in all its members.

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<sup>60</sup> *Const.*, 90.1.

The assistant often has to make people feel that they belong to a fraternity, and must persuade all to use their talents. At times we underrate the members of the SFO. Many of our brothers and sisters have special gifts and abilities that they often do not see and realize. Sometimes it is enough to encourage them and give them a chance.

#### **4.6 On the formation team**

As a member of the formation team, the assistant is not the only leader, nor should he behave as if he were. There is also the formator, and even though they are not present, the minister and the council with their guidelines. The assistant's task is to give witness to the authenticity of the charism and to be a safe and enlightened guide. Therefore the assistant neither commands nor directs, neither administers nor organizes, but rather gives witness to the Word of God, of which he or she is the representative and signpost.

The assistant must collaborate in the formation of all, especially initial and ongoing formation. The assistant will find out how to exercise the role of formator in the council meetings, in assemblies, in spiritual direction, in celebrations and when animating the prayer. The following factors must be kept in mind.

*Objectives:*

- To help new members prepare themselves for the definitive "proposal."
- To accompany the professed in persevering and entering more fully into their commitment.

*Method:*

- By the example and witness of a Franciscan life.
- By collaborating as a member with the formation group, without imposing his or her own ideas, but instead forming the group itself, helping especially in dealing with areas that are often unfamiliar to seculars; by evaluating together the progress already made and that which still remains.
- By offering support through what he or she has to say and by the preparations made.

#### **4.7 In initial formation**

The assistant has the principal duty of:

- *Counselor:* The assistant enters into personal dialogue and, if requested, sacramental dialogue with the aspirant. The assistant helps the aspirants to clarify their vocation, to purify it and name it. He offers them his priestly service as a spiritual guide, in prayer and in the journey of conversion. The assistant accompanies them along the way of living the Gospel.
- *Guide:* Together with the council, the assistant will organize the formation curriculum, which he will develop further, as "expert" and "guarantor" of the magisterium and fidelity to the Franciscan charism, together with the formator,

and where present, the animator. Naturally he will enter into dialogue with the aspirants so as to introduce them gradually and methodically to a deeper understanding of the truths of faith and to a knowledge of Franciscan spirituality.

The assistant plays a particularly delicate and essential role:

- Through his ministerial function.
- Through his spiritual discernment.
- As a guide in the journey of faith and acquisition of the standards of Church life.
- By mediating an authentic Franciscan spirituality.

By virtue of his priestly ministry, he can, in a special way, enlighten and mold the candidate, especially in spiritual direction and the sacrament of reconciliation. In this way the assistant completes the overall formation of the candidates.

It is no coincidence that the *Constitutions* require the opinion of the assistant before the admission of a candidate to profession.<sup>61</sup>

#### **4.8 In ongoing formation**

The assistant will seek to collaborate with the council and minister, giving his support as one who is educated and experienced, so as to offer the brothers and sisters a program of ongoing formation:

- As a help and accompaniment to the continual conversion demanded by the Gospel.
- To form all to fulfill their proper mission in the Church and society through witness and evangelization.
- To teach the fraternity how to discern the signs of the times.

In everything suggested by the *Constitutions*<sup>62</sup> and in all initiatives of a formative nature taken by the council, the assistant should be present and should lend as much support as required.

### **5. Regional and national assistants**

#### **5.1. Regional assistants**

These are appointed by the major superior who has responsibility for the *altius moderamen* in the region, after consultation with the respective regional council of the SFO. Where more than one major superior is involved in the appointment, the norms

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<sup>61</sup> Cf. *Ibidem*, 41.1.

<sup>62</sup> Cf. *Ibidem*, 44.

established jointly by the superiors with jurisdiction in the territory of the regional fraternity shall be followed.<sup>63</sup>

If there is more than one regional assistant, they form a conference and render their service collegially.<sup>64</sup>

Within his own Order, the task of each regional assistant is:

- To keep the major superiors and his Order informed on the life and activities of the SFO and the Franciscan Youth in the region.
- To deal with matters regarding the service of assistance given by the Order to the SFO and the Franciscan Youth, meet the local fraternities assisted by his own Order in the region and keep constant fraternal contacts with the local assistants of his own Order.

The task of the Conference of Regional Assistants, or the regional assistant, if there is only one, is:

- To collaborate with the regional council in the task of spiritual and apostolic animation of the Secular Franciscans in the life of the Church and society in the region, and in a special way in the formation of the leaders.
- To provide for the pastoral visits of the local councils of the SFO and to ensure a presence at the local elective chapters.
- To coordinate, at the regional level, the service of spiritual assistance, the formation of the assistants and fraternal union among them.
- To foster the interest of the friars in the SFO and in the Franciscan Youth.

## **5.2. National assistants**

These are appointed by the competent major superior, after consultation with the respective national council. Where more than one major superior is involved in the appointment, the norms established together by the superiors in the jurisdiction of the national territory shall be followed. They give their service to the national council and provide spiritual assistance to the national fraternity. If there is more than one national assistant, they form a conference and render their service collegially.

Within his own Order, the task of each national assistant is:

- To keep the major superiors and his Order informed on the life and activities of the SFO and the Franciscan Youth in the country.
- To deal with matters regarding the service of assistance given by his Order to the SFO and to the Franciscan Youth, meet the local fraternities assisted by his own Order and keep fraternal and constant contacts with the regional and local assistants of his own Order.

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<sup>63</sup> *Statutes for Assistance*, 21.1.

<sup>64</sup> *Ibidem*, 21.2.

The task of the Conference of National Assistants, or the national assistant, if there is only one, is:

- To collaborate with the national council in the task of spiritual and apostolic animation of the Secular Franciscans in the life of the Church and society in the country, and in a special way in the formation of the leaders.
- To provide for the pastoral visits of the regional councils of the SFO and to ensure a presence at the regional elective chapters.
- To coordinate, at the national level, the service of spiritual assistance, the formation of the assistants, and fraternal union among them.
- To foster the interest of the friars in the SFO and in the Franciscan Youth.

### **5.3. Conferences of regional and national assistants**

Each conference of regional or national spiritual assistants (CSA) shall function collegially. If it wishes, it can add other members whose task shall be to advise and collaborate. The CSA should also determine which of its members will assume the presidency, the length of the term etc. But all the others should also take an active role in the exercise of pastoral care in the entire region. This is for reasons of practicality and efficiency, and to make sure that all the obediences participate, regardless of the number of fraternities under their pastoral care.

The remarks and directions given in the paragraph on the local assistant apply, with appropriate adaptations, to the CSA, as regards participation in the fraternity council, animation and guidance of the fraternity, in collaboration with the secular leaders (council and minister), co-responsibility in formation etc.

Like the Conference of General Assistants, the conferences of regional and national assistants, as delegates of the major superiors who appointed them, exercise the *altius moderamen* over the fraternities they assist. This duty is expressed particularly in the pastoral visit and by participation in the elective chapters of the lower level fraternities. We will deal with this specifically in the following sections.

### **5.4. In the pastoral visit**

One essential component of the pastoral visit carried out by the assistants to the SFO is a sense of fraternity. It is a meeting between brothers and sisters. The fraternity is the setting whose meetings must be animated. But this is not the whole visit. Although indispensable, the spirit of fraternity could lead to a kind of mutual self-gratification, which would not be of real service to the brothers and sisters. But neither can the assistant's visit be reduced to a fiscal and purely juridical visit.

It is not easy to find a clear line of demarcation between a pastoral visit by the assistants and a fraternal visit by the lay leaders. But it is useful to at least try to identify certain general principles to keep in mind.

A visit by the assistants should have, first of all, a “promotional” purpose. Presupposing that the assistant has a good knowledge of the common Franciscan charism, he or she can contribute to its deeper understanding, taking into account the difference in its lay expression, in order to avoid a simple projection.

The visit should also have some more concrete benchmarks. For the visit to be an examination, it is necessary to start with the planning: planning for formation, planning for activities, planning for fraternity meetings etc. Where no real planning exists locally, the assistant can ask for and initiate it. Later, there will be other meetings to verify it.

Naturally, one essential point of the examination has to do with the lay nature of the Secular Franciscans, that is, their autonomy from the First Orders and the quality of their mission. Unfortunately, the danger of remaining closed concerning obligations *ad intra* (e.g. meetings, mutual services, practices of piety etc.) is not just hypothetical. Were it necessary to limit it to this, the SFO would lose significance and become outdated.

The examination should also deal with the relationship between time for contemplation and time for social commitment. The two must be kept closely linked and must be Franciscan in character. There is a kind of Franciscan contemplation, different from Benedictine or Dominican; there is a Franciscan spirit in performing social works, different from the Salesian spirit. It is not a matter of wanting at all costs to look for something special; it is a matter of faithfulness to one’s specific membership. Above all it is a matter of contributing to the Church’s mission through the rich diversity of charisms.

Naturally, underlying all guidelines there should emerge the need to give formation a special place. With so many new things, a profound and ongoing formation is demanded. In formation, continuity and creativity must constantly go together.

Speaking of the pastoral and fraternal visit, the *Rule* of the SFO expresses itself in these terms: “To promote fidelity to the charism as well as observance of the *Rule* and to receive greater support in the life of the fraternity, the minister or president, with the consent of the council, should take care to ask for a regular pastoral visit by the competent religious superior as well as for a fraternal visit from those of the higher fraternities, according to the norm of the *Constitutions*” (Art. 26).

The *General Constitutions*, in Article 92, state:

With the consent of the appropriate council, the request for a fraternal visit as well as for a pastoral visit is made:

- a. by the minister of the local and regional fraternity, at least every three years, to the council of the immediately higher level and to the respective conference of spiritual assistants;
- b. by the national minister, at least every six years to the Presidency of the International Council of the SFO and to the conference of general assistants;

c. by the general minister, at least every six years, to the Conference of General Ministers.

For urgent and serious reasons or in case of failure on the part of the minister or the council to request it, the fraternal and pastoral visit may be carried out upon the initiative of the respectively competent council or conference of spiritual assistants.

The *General Constitutions* also describe the purpose and manner of the visits:

Art. 92.1 – The purpose of both the pastoral and fraternal visits is to revive the evangelical Franciscan spirit, to assure fidelity to the charism and to the *Rule*, to offer help to fraternity life, to reinforce the bond of the unity of the Order, and to promote its most effective insertion into the Franciscan family and the Church.

Art 93.1 – In the visits to the local fraternities and to the councils at the various levels, the visitor will verify the evangelical and apostolic vitality, the observance of the *Rule* and *Constitutions*, and the insertion of the fraternities into the Order and into the Church.

Art. 93.2 – In the visits to the local fraternities and to the councils at the various levels, the visitor will in time communicate the object and the program of the visit to the interested council. He or she will examine the registers and the records, including those relative to the preceding visits, to the election of the council and to the administration of goods.

The visitor will draw up a report of the visit carried out, appending it to the records in the appropriate register of the fraternity visited, and will inform the council of the level which has held the visit.

A pastoral or fraternal visit can be made to the whole fraternity or to the council of the fraternity. The purpose of the visit must be clearly defined and the visitor should communicate to the council the prearranged objectives. The purpose of both visits is to revive the evangelical Franciscan spirit, to assure fidelity to the charism and to the *Rule*, to offer help to fraternity life, to reinforce the fraternity's bond of unity, to foster its insertion into the Franciscan Family and into the Church. The ordinary points to be verified are the evangelical and apostolic vitality, the insertion of the SFO fraternity into the Franciscan Family and the Church, and the examination of the registers and records, including those relative to the election of the council and to the administration of goods.

We continue with Art. 93 of the *General Constitutions*:

In the visit to the local fraternity, the visitor will meet with the entire fraternity and with the groups and sections into which it is divided. He or she will give special attention to the brothers and sisters in formation and to those brothers and sisters who may request a personal meeting. Where required, he or she will proceed to the fraternal correction of the shortcomings eventually encountered.

During the visit to the local fraternity, it is useful to meet twice with the council, once at the beginning in order to allow the visitor to learn about the fraternity, and again at the end to communicate the recommendations to the council and to plan together for the future. Besides the time devoted to personal meetings, provision is made for meeting with the assistant, with the entire fraternity (and its various groups), with the candidates in initiation and formation, and with the council of YouFra that is part of the local SFO fraternity. Also to be considered is the possibility of meeting with the parish priest, whether he is a Franciscan or not, and with the guardian when the fraternity is located in a Franciscan house.

After the part common to both visits, the *General Constitutions* of the SFO describe separately the fraternal visit and the pastoral visit. With regard to the pastoral visit, Art. 95.1 says:

The pastoral visit is a privileged moment of communion with the First Order and the TOR. It is carried out also in the name of the Church and serves to guarantee and promote the observance of the *Rule* and the *Constitutions* and fidelity to the Franciscan charism. The visit is carried out with respect to the organization and law proper to the SFO itself.

Here we are speaking about the assistant visitor, not the assistant of the local fraternity. Indeed, the latter is among the ones who receive the visit.

According to Art. 95, the pastoral visit is also an exercise of jurisdiction, that is, an expression of the *altius moderamen* mentioned in Art. 85.2 and 86.1 of the *General Constitutions* of the SFO:

The spiritual and pastoral care of the SFO, entrusted by the Church to the Franciscan First Order and the TOR is the duty, above all, of their general and provincial ministers. The *altius moderamen*, of which Canon 303 speaks, belongs to them....

The *altius moderamen* is meant to guarantee the fidelity of the SFO to the Franciscan charism, communion with the Church and union with the Franciscan Family “values which represent a vital commitment for the Secular Franciscans” (Art. 85.2).

The general and provincial ministers exercise their office with respect to the SFO through:

- the establishment of fraternities;
- the pastoral visits
- the spiritual assistance to the fraternities at the various levels.

They may exercise this office personally or through a delegate (Art. 86.1).

The regional and national assistants are delegates of the provincial ministers.

With regard to jurisdiction, we read in Canon 129 of the Code of Canon Law:

1. Those who are in sacred orders are, in accordance with the provisions of law, capable of the power of governance, which belongs to the Church by divine institution. This power is also called the power of jurisdiction.
2. Lay members of Christ's faithful can cooperate in the exercise of this same power in accordance with the law.

In order to exercise the power of jurisdiction during the pastoral visit, the delegate referred to in Art. 86.1 of the *General Constitutions* of the SFO must be in sacred orders. Therefore a spiritual assistant who is not a priest is allowed to make only a fraternal visit to an SFO fraternity.

In carrying out a pastoral visit in the name of the Church, the visitor should guarantee and promote observance of the *Rule* and *Constitutions* and fidelity to the Franciscan charism. Regarding the specific tasks of the assistant in the pastoral visit, the *General Constitutions* of the SFO say in Art. 95:

2. Having verified the canonical establishment of the fraternity, the visitor will give attention to the relations between the fraternity and its spiritual assistant and the local Church. The visitor will meet the pastors (bishop or parish priest) when this is opportune for fostering communion and service for building up the Church.
3. The visitor will promote collaboration and a sense of co-responsibility among the secular leaders and the religious assistants. The visitor is to examine the quality of the spiritual assistance given to the visited fraternity, encourage the spiritual assistants in their service and promote their continuing spiritual and pastoral formation.
4. The visitor will give special attention to programs, methods and experiences of formation, to the liturgical and prayer life, and to the apostolic activities of the fraternity.

This means that the pastoral visitor must:

- Verify the canonical establishment of the fraternity; if this has not been done, he will suggest the formalities to be followed.
- Give special attention to programs, methods and experiences of formation; to the liturgical and prayer life; to the apostolic activities of the fraternity.
- Give attention to the relations between the fraternity and the spiritual assistant, meeting with the pastors in order to foster communion and build up the Church on the parish and diocesan level.
- Promote collaboration and co-responsibility among the lay and religious leaders, examining the quality of the spiritual assistance given by the friars, encouraging the spiritual assistant in his service, promoting the assistant's continuing and pastoral formation.

In the meetings provided for during the visit, the pastoral visitor should give everyone a chance to dialogue in an exchange of questions and answers, sharing faith, hope and love with all. For the pastoral visitor to carry out his role, it is essential that he pray with the fraternity the Liturgy of the Hours and the Eucharist, or in some other way (e.g. spontaneous prayer, Way of the Cross, Rosary), and that he proclaim the Word of God with homilies that are well-prepared and that cite the *Rule*, the *Ritual* and the *General Constitutions*.

### **5.5. Connection between the pastoral visit and the fraternal visit**

In Art. 93.4 of the *General Constitutions* of the SFO it says: “If it is useful for the service of the fraternity, the two visitors, secular and religious, may make the visit at the same time, agreeing beforehand on the program, in a way most consonant with the mission of each of them.”

There are certain advantages in making the two visits, pastoral and fraternal, together. In this way personal impressions can be compared, methods to adopt can be discussed, and perhaps mistaken judgments can also be avoided. When they are together, the two visitors have more chances to listen and evaluate. If the pastoral visitor is alone, he has less chance to dialogue with the lay leaders. Initiatives involving greater responsibility can be taken if both visitors are present.

Yet a joint visit can make it harder to grasp the importance of the two things. Indeed, it can sometimes happen that the participants attach more importance to one visitor than to the other. In some cultures little attention is paid to the lay visitor (especially if it is a woman!) if a priest visitor is also present. Or even if the two visitors are men, it can happen that the secular finds it hard to place himself on an equal footing with the priest.

It is essential to avoid situations in which one can overshadow the other. The visitors themselves will have to be careful to maintain a balance between jobs that are of equal importance and see to it that each one has a chance to present himself and get on with his job. Each of the two visitors is important and performs a specific task. To ignore the importance of either visit, fraternal or pastoral, would leave a bad impression with the fraternity and the assistant.

A single report can be drawn up for both visits. However, each visitor is free to express him- or herself in a separate report. In reality, the visits have different purposes, and there are things that need to be said to one visitor or to the other. In the same way, the visitors remain free to make separate visits when asked or when useful.

### **5.6. In the elective chapters**

The SFO *Rule* says very little about elections. In Art. 21 we read: “On various levels, each fraternity is animated and guided by a council and minister (or president) who are elected by the professed according to the constitutions.”

The *General Constitutions* of the SFO say in Art. 76:

2. The elective assembly, or chapter, will be presided over by the minister of the immediately higher level, or by his or her delegate, who confirms the election.... The spiritual assistant of the immediately higher level or his delegate is to be present as a witness of the communion with the First Order and the TOR....
3. The president of the chapter and the assistant of the higher level do not have the right to vote.

The assistant (or assistants) of the fraternity that is holding an elective chapter does not enjoy active voice, as explained in the *Statutes for Assistance*, Art. 12.3: “Only in economic matters and in elections at any level does he or she not enjoy the right to vote.”

It is necessary to keep in mind:

- In the local fraternity this right belongs solely to the professed members of the same fraternity.<sup>65</sup>
- At the other levels, “the *secular* members of the outgoing council” have active voice.<sup>66</sup>

The assistant of the next higher level does not act as president of the elective chapter, nor does he vote. He is present as witness of the communion that should exist between the lay leaders and the friars, and between the fraternity and the First Order and TOR.

On the occasion of the chapter he shall carry out his specific duty, which is that of spiritual and apostolic animator and formator of the lay leaders, stimulating the chapter’s interest in the pastoral problems and plans of the Church.

In order to present himself as a witness of communion, the assistant shall live it in his attitude, words and actions. He must be convinced that the Franciscan vocation and charism, lived by both religious and laity, demonstrate the vitality of the Franciscan Family. His service as witness of communion is of great help, but he must not take the place of the president of the chapter, to whom belong the guidance, coordination and animation of the chapter.

## **5.7. Connection between the visits and the elective chapter**

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<sup>65</sup> Cf. *Const.*, 77.1.

<sup>66</sup> Cf. *Ibidem*, 77.2.

Experience has shown the need to connect the visits and the elective chapter. This connecting can be done in two ways.

The visits can be made immediately before the elective chapter. In this way the fraternal visitor will assume the role of president of the elective chapter, and the pastoral visitor the role of assistant of the higher level (or his delegate). This solution responds to practical concerns (e.g. to cut down on travel expenses, to avoid duplicate moves, the lack of available time), but it takes the “edge” off the visit because the attention of the outgoing council and the assembled Secular Franciscans is already focused on the elections that are to follow.

The visits can be made at least three months before the chapter. This solution is much better because the fraternity has a chance to reflect on itself and on the role of the council. It also gives a chance to prepare adequately for the chapter by involving not only the present council but all who have the right to vote. If it is foreseen that some capitulars will be absent (e.g. the elderly, the sick or those prevented for various reasons), it is possible to ask them for suggestions about names to be placed on the list.

The whole fraternity should be involved in a program of prayer to the Holy Spirit to beg for discernment and total submission to his promptings.

## **6. Experience of the Conference of General Spiritual Assistants (CGA)**

### **6.1 Role of the CGA**

The Conference of General Spiritual Assistants has an important role in the international council and in the presidency of the International Council of the SFO, to which its members belong.<sup>67</sup>

The role of the CGA can be considered under two aspects: charism and collaboration.

Under the charismatic aspect, it is important to recognize in the Secular Franciscan Order a charismatic life that takes its origin from Francis of Assisi, the same as for religious of the First and Second Order, even though it is distinct by reason of its secular expression. This is a sign of the expressive richness of the gift of the Spirit, communicated through the man Francis, and the rich complementarity that arises within the Franciscan Family, in which the religious and secular expression live side by side, elements that emphasize the life-giving union existing among the different Orders within the same Franciscan Family.<sup>68</sup> To this must be added the spiritual and pastoral care of the SFO, which the Holy See has entrusted to the First Order and the TOR. Spiritual and pastoral assistance can be likened to the service of the Good Shepherd (Cf. Jn 10:1-1), by

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<sup>67</sup> Cf. *Const.*, 72.1.

<sup>68</sup> Cf. *Rule SFO* 26; Cf. *Const.*, 89.1.

rendering assistance, “a fundamental element of communion.”<sup>69</sup> By living the same charism, the Franciscan charism, assistants are “witnesses of Franciscan spirituality.”<sup>70</sup> As members of the same family, they are witnesses of the “fraternal affection” of the religious Franciscans toward the Secular Franciscans and a bond of communion between the Orders.<sup>71</sup>

Under the aspect of collaboration,<sup>72</sup> the general assistants collaborate in all the activities that pertain to the international fraternity. This happens with the International Council of the SFO in both ordinary and extraordinary chapters. With the presidency of the International Council, they lend their assistance on four occasions: in the ordinary and extraordinary meetings of the presidency, in carrying out the programs of the various activities (courses of study, formation seminars), in the pastoral visits and in attending the national chapters.

## **6.2. CGA and its connection with the Conference of General Ministers**

The assistant’s two special tasks, assistance and animation, are carried out in an intense spirit of collaboration in the Conference of General Assistants, and of the latter with the Conference of General Ministers of the First Order and the TOR.

One expression of collegiality for the assistance to the SFO is the meetings had by the Conference of General Assistants for the SFO, in the person of its president, with the Conference of General Ministers of the First Order and the TOR. In addition, the CGA should give an account of its work to the Conference of General Ministers of the First Order and the TOR by means of an annual report.

## **6.3. CGA and its connection with the national assistants**

Assistance to the SFO, whose goal and objective is to foster communion with the Church, bear witness to the fraternal affection and bond of communion among all who wish to live the charism of Francis, as well as collaboration in formation, is carried out in collegial fashion.

Animation of the friars through knowledge and assistance to the SFO is the duty and job of each general assistant within his own Order. But even here he is working in collaboration in order to emphasize two things: collegiality, which must always be safeguarded except in the local fraternities, and preservation of the unity and autonomy of the SFO.

Expressions of collegiality, which the four general assistants of the SFO animate, are: their monthly meetings, the high points (live-in meetings lasting several days), the monthly prayer meetings with the lay leaders and the collaborators from the secretariat, presence at the national chapters, the pastoral visits, and the writing and publication of

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<sup>69</sup> Cf. *Const.*, 89.1.

<sup>70</sup> *Ibidem*, 89.3.

<sup>71</sup> *Ibidem*, 89.3.

<sup>72</sup> *Ibidem*, 89.4.

*Koinonia*, a small quarterly periodical that helps keep in touch with the assistants and contributes to their formation and is sometimes also used by the SFO fraternities themselves. Worthy of special mention are the formation seminars put on by the Conference for assistants in continents, sub-continents or for individual countries.

#### **6.4. Pastoral visits and national chapters**

Of particular importance in collaboration with the Secular Franciscans are the pastoral visits and the presence at national chapters by the general assistants.

As mentioned before, the purpose of the visits, including those initiated for urgent and grave reasons,<sup>73</sup> is to revive the evangelical Franciscan spirit, to aid and animate the fraternity in its journey, to reinforce the Order's bond of unity and its autonomy, in collaboration and co-responsibility between the assistants and the Secular Franciscans,<sup>74</sup> as well as to promote its most effective insertion into the Franciscan Family and into the life of the Church.<sup>75</sup>

The national chapter is an essential time for review, for decisions and choices, as well as for planning by the national fraternity. The presence of the general assistant is a witness of communion with the First Order and the TOR.<sup>76</sup>

Both the visit and the chapter, provided they are well-organized, are a precious time for continuing formation.<sup>77</sup>

### **7. Concept of assistance: project and mission**

#### **7.1. Communion and co-responsibility**

Article 26 of the *Rule* of the SFO is rich in content when it asks the superiors of the four religious Franciscan families for suitable and well-prepared religious for assistance to the fraternities at the various levels, as a sign of communion and co-responsibility:

- As a sign of communion in the same charism that animates the whole Franciscan Family and can only be understood in light of the rich plurality of its manifestations: men and women religious and seculars. It is a charism with many facets for the good of the Church: "There are varieties of gifts, but the same Spirit... To each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good" (1 Cor 12:4-7).
- As a sign of co-responsibility, but not in the government of the Secular Franciscan Order, since as the *General Constitutions* of the SFO rightly

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<sup>73</sup> *Ibidem*, 94.4.

<sup>74</sup> *Ibidem*, 94.4.

<sup>75</sup> *Ibidem*, 95.2.

<sup>76</sup> *Ibidem*, 76.2.

<sup>77</sup> *Ibidem*, 89.4.

emphasize, “this service of the religious ministers completes but does not substitute for the secular councils and ministers to whom belong the guidance, coordination and animation of the fraternities at the various levels.”

Co-responsibility arises, not from inability or lack of government or animation on the part of the Secular Franciscans, but rather from the charism, which needs to express the manifold riches poured out by the Spirit upon the Franciscan Family through Francis, a man of profound ecclesial vision. In order to be joyful and communicative, this ecclesiology must bear the sign of mission and proclamation through the apostolic life of the Lesser Brothers, through the contemplative life of the Poor Clares, and through the family life and social action of the Secular Franciscans.

## **7.2. Characteristics of the mission of the assistant**

### **7.2.1. Fraternization**

The text of the *Constitutions* is extremely meaningful and important when it speaks of the spiritual assistant’s mission: “To be a witness of Franciscan spirituality and of the fraternal affection of the religious towards the Secular Franciscans, and to be a bond of communion between his Order and the SFO, the spiritual assistant should be a Franciscan religious, member of the First Order or the TOR.”<sup>78</sup>

The assistant is a witness to the charism that permeates the life of the entire Franciscan Family through spirituality, fraternal affection and the bond of communion. This fraternization complements assistance with “familial” duties on the part of the First Order and the TOR, in order to cultivate the Franciscan charism and help it to grow in the SFO fraternities at the various levels. This fraternal and family aspect will be complemented with communion and mission.

### **7.2.2. Animation**

This is another aspect of the assistant’s mission. He or she collaborates in the animation by the secular leaders in the fraternity and in the council. The assistant’s task is to enlighten without imposing. The assistant does not have the last word. That belongs to the council with its minister.

Animation occupies a big place in the fraternity’s life: formation, reflection, prayer, the apostolate in its many expressions, by the fraternity as a whole as well as by the individual members sent and supported by the fraternity, which is responsible for their work when they present themselves as Secular Franciscans.

### **7.2.3. Formation**

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<sup>78</sup> *Ibidem*, 89.3.

Assistance in formation arises from the common charism, to help the members of the SFO acquire a better knowledge of Franciscan tradition and spirituality, which will help them grow in their Franciscan and secular vocation.

The assistant's collaboration in formation will allow for growth in solidarity with the Secular Franciscans, while at the same time the assistant will learn from them. The assistant is like a vessel of communication through which talents and abilities are transferred from the religious Franciscans to the seculars, and vice versa. In this way the charism is complemented and enriched in the members of both Orders, in their way of living it and expressing it in mission.

Today, when there is so much talk about collaboration between religious and laity, the Franciscan Family should look to its past in order to understand better the collaboration maintained in different areas between the SFO and the First Order and the TOR. Then, in the present, it can choose to invest in a rich and complete formation for the Secular Franciscans, who collaborate with the religious in so many tasks of everyday life. Why not count on their collaboration in our missions and apostolic activities, or on our help in theirs?

The future of the SFO depends on the investment made in the formation of its members, not only on the part of the SFO, but also on the part of the First Order and the TOR, which live in communion and solidarity with it. The assistant is a sign of these values. Formation helps increase the ability to listen, learn and collaborate within the religious family and also with respect to the SFO and its mission.

#### **7.2.4. Collaboration**

The post-conciliar exhortation *Vita Consecrata* invites us to a re-reading of the relationship between religious and seculars in light of the ecclesiology of communion: “In recent years, one of the fruits of the teaching on the Church as communion has been the growing awareness that her members can and must unite their efforts, with a view to cooperation and exchange of gifts, in order to participate more effectively in the Church’s mission. This helps to give a clearer and more complete picture of the Church herself, while rendering more effective the response to the great challenges of our time, thanks to the combined contributions of the various gifts.”<sup>79</sup>

This exchange, says the Pope, will benefit the seculars, who “will experience at first hand the spirit of the evangelical counsels, and will thus be encouraged to live and bear witness to the spirit of the Beatitudes, in order to transform the world according to God’s design.” It will also benefit the religious, who will see the richness of the charism shine beyond the boundaries of their own Order. Animated by the participation of the seculars, they will study more deeply “certain aspects of the charism, leading to a more spiritual interpretation of it and helping to draw from it directions for new activities in the apostolate.”<sup>80</sup>

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<sup>79</sup> VC, 54.

<sup>80</sup> VC, 55.

### 7.2.5. Reciprocity

Assistance is also ordered toward reciprocity, which does not exclude differences but rather demands them. Reciprocity between the First Order and TOR and the Secular Franciscan Order, between religious and secular Franciscans, is charismatic. Its goal is to overcome existing ruptures or inequalities of level by emphasizing the distinctive forms in which the charism is lived.

*Christifideles laici* reminds us that, using the words of Paul VI, “the Church has an authentic secular dimension, inherent to her intimate nature and mission, which is deeply rooted in the mystery of the Word Incarnate, and which is realized in different forms through her members.”<sup>81</sup> And Canon Law confirms this: “Flowing from their rebirth in Christ, there is a genuine equality of dignity and action among all of Christ’s faithful. Because of this equality they all contribute, each according to his or her own condition and office, to the building up of the Body of Christ.”<sup>82</sup> This reciprocity among Franciscans becomes a life project, lived in its specific religious or secular form.

Reciprocity expresses mutual recognition achieved through sincere relationships. Reciprocity implies recognition of the ways that lead to a sharing based on reflection and deliberation, a sharing that is active in the mission. It seeks authenticity without forgetting the differences, which themselves are precious, because these constitute the limits of reciprocity while at the same time they are its requirement.

### 7.3. Collaboration in the mission

The relationship between the SFO and the First Order and TOR does not arise, or should not arise, so much from lack of personnel, which in part has accelerated and given rise to collaboration between religious and laity. It arises from living the same charism from two complementary perspectives, secular and religious, for the benefit of the Church. The author of the *Legend of the Three Companions* points this out so well: “And thus, through blessed Francis...the Church of God was renewed in three orders....”<sup>83</sup>

Deeper study of these aspects, which are also dealt with in the exhortation *Vita Consecrata*, can promote them and serve as a stimulus to study and analyze our own vocation to follow Christ after the manner of Francis of Assisi. It commits the religious Franciscans, through the assistants, “to be, before all else, expert guides in the spiritual life, and in this perspective they should cultivate ‘the most precious gift: the spirit.’ For their part, the laity should offer Religious families the invaluable contribution of their ‘being in the world’ and their specific service.”<sup>84</sup>

In this collaboration and interchange a spiritual environment will grow and be created to the benefit of both parties, religious and seculars. This will help in the

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<sup>81</sup> CL, 15.4.

<sup>82</sup> Can. 208.

<sup>83</sup> L3C, 60; FA:ED II, 103.

<sup>84</sup> *Ibidem*.

discernment of their own identity and in collaboration in the mission or apostolic activities, which will complement the features they have in common.

#### **7.4. Mission in common**

It is well to remember that it is communion that leads us to unity in the different vocations existing within the Franciscan charism. Unity and communion are based on our common belonging to Christ in the unique call to follow him,<sup>85</sup> and on our sharing in the same Spirit. The primacy of the charism in the whole Franciscan Family lies in choosing and following Jesus of Nazareth, and in the free decision to share his life.

Francis's originality in giving seculars a life project for their state, similar to that he gave the brothers for their religious state, is interpreted for today by Hans Urs von Balthasar. He says that the disciples are called by Jesus to continue his mission by going from place to place, while the multitude of hearers and sick who crowd in around Jesus are transformed into new persons, even though he leaves them in their own state as a leaven of transformation.<sup>86</sup>

The Franciscan Orders will realize Francis's charism and interpret it for today only by living it together as a family in the life and mission of the Church. Seen this way, spiritual assistance, as animation, includes the life of mission, presence and openness to new ways of collaboration, the sign of communion. In the same way, collaboration between religious and seculars will improve in the family when there is better formation for all.

At the same time, the life of communion that arises from the charism and from the theology of communion in the Church will help us overcome the "uniformity" into which ecclesial life, both lay and religious, often falls. Communion within the Franciscan Family shows us the richness of the charism in the diversity of its expressions, which arises from the creative power of the Spirit, through Francis. Thomas of Celano says of him: "He is without question an outstanding craftsman, for through his spreading message, the Church of Christ is being renewed in both sexes according to his form, rule and teaching, and there is victory for the triple army of those being saved."<sup>87</sup>

#### **7.5. Conclusion**

What could we add to the topic of sharing, collaboration and exchange between the Secular Franciscans and the religious Franciscans, anchored and animated as we are by the same charism?

Collaboration and exchange in mission are required of Franciscans, both religious and secular, by the mission of the Church itself. In looking more deeply at these aspects,

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<sup>85</sup> "The rule and life of the Lesser Brothers is this: to observe the holy Gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ" (LR I, 1). "The rule and life of the Secular Franciscans is this: to observe the Gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ by following the example of Saint Francis of Assisi" (*Rule SFO*, 4).

<sup>86</sup> H.U. von Balthasar, *Los estados de vida*, pp. 233 and 286.

<sup>87</sup> 1C 37; FA:ED I, 216.

the exhortation *Vita Consecrata* could serve as a stimulus to both groups to study and analyze their vocation to follow Christ after the manner of Francis of Assisi.

We should consider assistance as a service in which two currents come together. One flows from the First Order and TOR toward the Secular Franciscans; the other flows from the SFO toward the religious. This will happen if we know how to be welcoming and receive the vitality of our Franciscan charism expressed in a secular key, which enriches us as a Family and in our mission.

If the work of assistance has no common platform for secular and religious Franciscans, there will arise in both groups a self-marginalization that will be costly for both us and the Gospel. Assistance should be the environment in which there is room for mutual exchange, for respect for the prerogatives of both parties, religious and secular, and for collaboration in apostolic activities and the mission *ad gentes*.

The conclusions arrived at by the major superiors of Italy during their day of reflection on “Religious and Lay Relations” in November 2000, also hold true for us. For most religious families this is a new topic. The Franciscan Family, however, has a whole heritage of history and spirituality that should urge us to be pioneers, opening new paths for collaboration, starting with spiritual assistance. In this respect the resolutions approved by the fortieth assembly of the Conference of Major Superiors of Italy can help us: “Religious should continue to revitalize the formulas for participating in the spirituality of the mendicant Orders (Third Orders)...so as to renew a monastic tradition that has had a great impact on the Church, as a still-valid proposal for formation and collaboration with the laity.”

In order to form laity and religious in a culture of collaboration, cooperation and co-responsibility:

- Superiors should encourage the creation of projects in which religious and laity are involved.
- Collaboration between laity and consecrated religious should take place especially at the local level.
- Formation courses for leaders and on roles of responsibility should be organized, so that Institutes of Consecrated Life might contribute to a significant growth in ecclesial awareness on the part of the laity.
- In the context of sharing the charism of the Order, use should be made of the seculars' ability to run services (administrative, organizational...) that are normally performed by religious.
- There should be formed a group (permanent or ad hoc) of seculars who share the charism and are professionally qualified to support the formators in the processes of vocational discernment and initial and ongoing formation.
- Development projects in the younger Churches should be encouraged through cooperation and exchange of laity and religious in the mission *ad gentes*.
- Initiatives by seculars and religious to promote an ecclesial culture of collaboration should be proposed.

These conclusions<sup>88</sup> can help us to reflect on the same charism lived by religious and seculars, the Franciscan charism, which by means of assistance can flourish again in each part, with areas of genuine cooperation and with a mutual exchange of the talents that have been given to both.

## **8. The SFO in the formation programs of the First Order and the TOR**

### **8.1. Suitability and formation**

In the request for “suitable and well-prepared” religious for assistance, two adjectives appear. These encompass qualities that will help the spiritual assistant fulfill his primary task of animation and formation. “Suitable” speaks to us of the quality of the religious, fit and suited to fulfill this service to the fraternities of the SFO. “Prepared” means having an adequate formation that will allow the assistant to be available and at the service of the SFO. The most important thing is that the assistant be “suitable.” One who is capable and open is suitable. Such a person is able to collaborate and be open to the Spirit, able to return to the sources of the charism. Assistance will be suitable if the assistant is open to formation, to knowing the SFO and collaborating with it.

Those ultimately responsible for assistance have been and continue to be the major superiors: ministers and custodes. This means that the brother ministers must be fully open to dialogue with the council and ministers of the SFO in general, and in particular for the appointment of assistants and for knowing the state of assistance in the fraternities, at whatever level pertains to them as major superiors.<sup>89</sup>

The *Constitutions* of 2000 introduced some interesting notes with regard to assistance. Concretely, they offer a wide range of possible candidates for assistance, always bearing in mind that this wide range of choices must never be to the detriment of the suitability and good formation of the assistant, at whatever level.<sup>90</sup>

Called by the Church to provide spiritual assistance to the Secular Franciscans, we will be able to do this suitably and effectively as long as we are able to use formation to get to know the SFO, to know it in order to love it, and to love it in order to serve it. In this way we will create much greater communion, as the *General Constitutions* of the Secular Franciscan Order remind us: “To be a witness of Franciscan spirituality and of the fraternal affection of the religious towards the Secular Franciscans, and to be a bond of communion between his Order and the SFO, the spiritual assistant should be a Franciscan religious, member of the First Order or the TOR.”<sup>91</sup>

### **8.2. Importance of formation**

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<sup>88</sup> Cf. AA.VV., *Laici e Religiosi; quale relazione ecclesiale? Nuove progettualità per i nostri Istituti*, Il Calamo, Roma 2001, pp. 237-239.

<sup>89</sup> Cf. *Const.*, 89.1-2.

<sup>90</sup> Cf. *Ibidem*, 89.4.

<sup>91</sup> *Ibidem*, 89.3.

We see that there are assistants who carry out their task diligently, conscious of their mission. They dedicate themselves to knowing, loving and appreciating the SFO and YouFra. For this reason they are motivated to update themselves constantly in order to accompany the Secular Franciscans and the Franciscan Youth with a fraternal spirit. For this we express our gratitude to them, to their superiors and to God. Yet we also see many cases where the SFO and YouFra are not known as they exist today, in the process of renewal and in the new documents. This creates apathy and indifference on the part of some religious brothers, to the detriment of our Franciscan Family.

For this reason the subject of presenting the SFO in the programs of formation and studies of the First Order and TOR—for the knowledge, study, understanding and appreciation of the SFO on the part of the religious—is very important and necessary. Only by knowing the SFO will it be loved, and only by loving it will it be assisted with fraternal affection.

To this basic consideration we can add two others:

1. Making the SFO part of the study plans of religious Franciscans would be like giving them an identity card within the Franciscan Family. We would go from the short summaries that were offered in the novitiate, in which the the SFO was considered a simple appendix to the history of the First Order and TOR, to giving it its place in the Franciscan Family and in the Church.
2. The second arises from a sense of complementarity in the same charism, the charism of Francis of Assisi. Or, as it is expressed in the SFO *Rule*: “In various ways and forms but in life-giving union with each other, they intend to make present the charism of their common Seraphic Father.” This charism, which includes the women religious, is manifested as a mosaic, much richer, more colorful and complementary than the single hue of the friars.

Inclusion of the SFO in the formation programs of the religious of the First Order and TOR would help us understand better our identity in the Franciscan Family. It would give us the opportunity to understand the generative power of the Spirit, when we allow ourselves to be invaded by him, as did Francis. The wind of communion and co-responsibility—what would it not do in a family such as the Franciscan Family?

In other words, inclusion of the SFO in the formation programs of the friars would serve to reinvigorate it and enrich it with the energy of the Franciscan charism in all its shades, going beyond its present generic nature, which is chiefly pastoral and functional.

Some essential elements for initial and ongoing formation can be singled out in the following areas: ecclesiology of the laity; mission of the Secular Franciscan in the Church and in the world; history and spirituality of the SFO. We have already spoken about these in the previous chapters. We will turn briefly only to the first of these areas because of its great importance.

### 8.3. Ecclesiology of the laity

It seems fitting to stress the ecclesiological aspect of the laity, because the Secular Franciscan Order is a Franciscan Order, as is ours, but with its lay characteristic.

The laity, and therefore the Secular Franciscans also, have received “the call of the Lord Jesus, ‘You go into my vineyard too....’ The call is a concern not only of Pastors, clergy, and men and women religious. The call is addressed to everyone: lay people as well are personally called by the Lord, from whom they receive a mission on behalf of the Church and the world.”<sup>92</sup>

The ecclesiology of the laity contains within itself a “rich doctrinal, spiritual and pastoral patrimony...on the nature, dignity, spirituality, mission and responsibility of the lay faithful.”<sup>93</sup>

Post-conciliar ecclesiology speaks of great changes introduced by Vatican II and of a new image sketched out by the Council, in which the laity—and this applies also to the Secular Franciscans—grow in awareness of their gift and responsibility in the communion and mission of the Church.

Among the main points are:

- the doctrine of the Church as communion and People of God hierarchically structured;
- the fundamental equality of all its members;
- the co-responsibility of the members in the Church’s mission;
- the universal priesthood of the faithful and the sharing of all the baptized in the priesthood of Christ and in his threefold prophetic, priestly and kingly function (cf. 2 Pt 2:9; Rev 1:6);
- the reality of the charisms the Spirit bestows on all the members of the Church community;
- the responsibility of the Church and Christians in the face of present-day problems of humanity on a local and world level.

In particular, we friars of the First Order and TOR would do well to remember that the Church also includes the Secular Franciscans, and to reject certain attitudes that are more or less classist or paternalistic. Similar to the priest-laity relationship in the Church, in the Franciscan Family we must strive to live the triple relationship of friars-sisters-Secular Franciscans.

If we religious Franciscans could create true communion with the Secular Franciscans in the search for faith and in mission, there would arise, thanks to their common priesthood, the mysterious joy of a fullness that expands the heart. This was the

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<sup>92</sup> CL, 2.

<sup>93</sup> *Ibidem*.

lived experience of Saint John Chrysostom, which he summed up by saying that the laity are “the priestly fullness of the bishop.”<sup>94</sup>

#### **8.4. Guidelines on the formation of religious for understanding and assisting the SFO**

Based on the criteria set forth above, the Conference of General Assistants has drawn up “Guidelines for the Formation of Religious for Understanding and Assisting the SFO.” These are meant to answer a felt need of the part of Franciscans, religious and secular, to prepare better to “walk together in the ways of the Lord.”

Among all Franciscans there exists a mutual knowledge and life-giving communion demanded by the fact that they belong to the same spiritual family. The different components “can and must unite their efforts, with a view to cooperation and exchange of gifts, in order to participate more effectively in the Church’s mission.”<sup>95</sup> This exchange of gifts “often brings unexpected and rich insights into certain aspects of the charism, leading to a more spiritual interpretation of it and helping to draw from it directions for new activities in the apostolate.”<sup>96</sup>

The SFO *Rule* and *Constitutions* repeat many times the principle of membership in the same spiritual family, life-giving and mutual communion, and the duty of the First Order (OFM, OFMConv, OFMCap) and Third Order Regular (TOR) to provide pastoral care and assistance.

Between the SFO, the First Order and TOR there exists a twofold and essential relationship:

##### *1. Sharing a common charism*

The *Rule* of the SFO speaks of the “life-giving and mutual communion” that must exist between the Seculars and all the branches of the Franciscan Family, in order to make present, in various ways and forms, the charism of their common Seraphic Father in the life and mission of the Church.<sup>97</sup>

##### *2. Spiritual and pastoral assistance*

Because of this communion and according to an age-old tradition, it rests with the superiors of the First Order and TOR to provide for spiritual assistance by “suitable and well-prepared religious” and through the pastoral visit to the fraternities of the SFO.<sup>98</sup>

The Secular Franciscan Order—committed to the renewal of its life, formation and organization of its fraternities—needs to count on spiritual assistance that is updated and dynamically coordinated with the other components of the Franciscan Family in its

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<sup>94</sup> PG, 62, col. 204.

<sup>95</sup> VC, 54.

<sup>96</sup> VC, 55.

<sup>97</sup> *Rule SFO*, 1.

<sup>98</sup> Cf. *Ibidem*, 26.

single mission. “Consecrated persons should remember that before all else they must be expert guides in the spiritual life, and in this perspective they should cultivate ‘the most precious gift: the spirit.’”<sup>99</sup>

The SFO general chapter of Fatima (1990) put it this way: “For the role of animation that belongs to the spiritual assistants formation is needed, in other words, special preparation of the friars with regard to the SFO. This preparation must be conscious and incorporated into the formation program—initial and ongoing—of all the friars. Even if not all are or will be spiritual assistants, it is certainly necessary for the realization of their own personal vocation that all should know, understand and affirm the truly essential role of the SFO.”<sup>100</sup>

The SFO general chapter of Rome (1996), in its conclusions, says again: “The Presidency of the International Council of the SFO, in collaboration with the national councils, will seek times and ways to...stimulate a deeper formation of all the friars with regard to the SFO, so that they might help the brothers and sisters to better live their form of life.”<sup>101</sup>

The SFO general chapter of 2002, held again in Rome, re-emphasizes “the importance of fully implementing the words of the *Rule* about the suitability and preparation of assistants, both religious and lay, hoping for a significant addition of suitable historical, theological and spiritual topics in programs of initial and ongoing formation for the friars, sisters and seculars.”<sup>102</sup>

The religious Franciscan Orders, to whom belongs the *altius moderamen*, not only have accepted and emphasized the principle of “life-giving and mutual communion” in their legislation, but the general and provincial ministers, through letters and various speeches, are constantly urging the friars to an ever greater and better knowledge of the SFO, demanding adequate preparation for spiritual assistants.

The CSA guidelines will be presented to all religious Franciscans for possible use in the various formation plans. The goals are knowledge of the SFO within the Franciscan Family and in its mission in the Church and the world, and the preparation of those who are called to serve as spiritual assistants.

## **8.5. Programs of instruction on the SFO**

### *1. In initial formation*

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<sup>99</sup> VC, 55.

<sup>100</sup> Cf. Conclusions of the General Chapter of the SFO, Fatima 1990, in Bollettino CIOFS, XII, n. 2, 1990 p. 6.

<sup>101</sup> Cf. Koinonia, 1996, n. 4; Internet document <http://www ofs.it/per/lc96it28.html>; *Statutes for Assistance* 5.4; *Const.*, 95.3.

<sup>102</sup> Cf. Atti del Capitolo, p. 210.

### A. Postulancy:

- Francis, the “founder” of three Orders.
- History:
  1. General introduction on the Franciscan Family
  2. First Order of Friars Minor (OFM, OFMConv, OFMCap)
  3. Second Order, the Order of Saint Clare
  4. Third Order of the “Brothers and Sisters of Penance”
    - Secular Franciscan Order (SFO, Franciscan Youth)
    - Third Order Regular, men and women
  5. Other Franciscan movements: Secular Institutes etc.
- Experience:
  1. Contacts with an SFO fraternity and YouFra
  2. Visit by the Secular Franciscans to the house of formation
  3. Visit by the postulants to secular fraternities
  4. Celebration of the major Franciscan feasts together

### B. Novitiate:

- Repeat in greater depth what was done during postulancy.
- In the general discussion of the universal call to holiness and the religious vocation, talk also about the Secular Franciscan vocation seen in the sharing of the common charism in life-giving and mutual communion in the Church’s mission: “Go and rebuild...”
- In dealing with the history of the Franciscan Family, talk about the Penitents and the origins of the Third Order.
- Reading: Rules of the First, Second and Third Orders (Later Rule, 1223; Rule of Saint Clare, 1253, and Rule of the Order of Saint Clare, the so-called Rule of Urban IV, 1263; *Seraphicus Patriarcha* of Paul VI, 1978, for the SFO, and *Franciscanum vitae propositum* of John Paul II, 1982, for the TOR).
- Experiences: take part in some fraternity meetings, times of prayer, celebrations in the various phases of the life of the SFO fraternity.

### C. Post-novitiate:

- History of the Franciscan Family, including the SFO, in its essential lines through the centuries; presence and development in one’s own country; relationships with the First Order and TOR; birth of new Orders and Congregations from the SFO.
- Nature, identity, structure and organization of the SFO according to the new *Rule* and *Constitutions*, stressing its secular nature and its unity.
- Emphasize the vision of the Church as People of God and communion (*Lumen Gentium*, *Gaudium et Spes*, final document of the 1985 Synod).
- Study the role of the lay faithful, co-responsibility and collaboration between clergy and laity, religious and seculars in the mission of the

Church (*Evangelii nuntiandi*, *Christifideles laici*, Letter of the General Ministers on the Lay Franciscan Faithful).

- In studying the Church's social teaching (beginning with *Rerum novarum*), pay special attention to the duties and responsibilities of the laity.
- Study the nature of spiritual and pastoral assistance to the SFO, its collegiality and the identity of the assistant.
- Reading: Earlier Rule (1221), *Memoriale propositi* (1221), *Supra Montem* of Nicholas IV (1289), *Misericors Dei Filius* of Leo XIII (1883) and *Seraphicus Patriarcha* of Paul VI (1978).
- Group pastoral experiences, led by the spiritual assistant, taking part in fraternity meetings, times of prayer, celebrations in the various phases of the life of the SFO fraternity.

It is good to remember that what is suggested in this section is not to be understood as the addition of other material to the program. Rather, it is intended to develop, in the areas indicated, the material in the existing curriculum, such as history, spirituality, ecclesiology, social teaching etc.

## 2. *In ongoing formation*

Express mutual communion, by reason of the common charism and as a sign of witness in the Church, according to the guidelines given in the *General Constitutions* and the *General Statutes* of the First Order and TOR, and the *General Constitutions* of the SFO:

- Plan and celebrate together the main liturgies, especially on Franciscan feasts, and create community prayer experiences.
- Plan and carry out pastoral, charitable and social activities together, with courageous initiatives according to the needs of time and place.
- Study together, friars and seculars, the documents on the theology of the laity (Cf. 8.3 above).
- Organize common get-togethers, assemblies, spiritual chapters, retreats.
- In formation meetings and in the celebration of chapters, plan times for the seculars to be present with a message or witness talk.

## 8.6. Formation of spiritual assistants

New spiritual assistants need to have an opportunity to prepare for their special task. It does not seem too much to have a school for special preparation at the provincial, national or international level. The subjects to be dealt with will be those indicated earlier under the heading of initial formation, or:

- History and sources of the SFO.
- Vision of the specific identity of the SFO.
- Ecclesiology and the SFO.

- Secular Franciscan spirituality.
- The Secular Franciscan in the Church and society.
- Franciscan values of the SFO.
- Formation of the friars with regard to the SFO.
- Practical aspects of assistance to the SFO.
- SFO, Franciscan Youth and Little Heralds.
- Members who want to belong to an SFO fraternity and Friends of Saint Francis.

### *Updating*

For continual updating of the assistants, the following are suggested:

- Annual formation courses; information on assistance, on various problems, on what is happening in the SFO.
- Reading periodicals and informational material from the different Orders concerning the SFO and assistance on the national and international level.
- Knowledge and exchange of programs and initiatives between general, national, regional and local assistants.

## **8.7. Leaders or agents**

### *1. General and provincial ministers*

- Foster interest among their own friars in the SFO, and communion between religious and secular Franciscans.
- See to the formation of the formators and the interest of all their religious in the SFO.
- See to it that the SFO and YouFra have a place in the programs of initial and ongoing formation for their religious.
- In visits to the friars' fraternity and at chapters inquire about the SFO and YouFra and the quality of the assistance.

### *2. Spiritual assistants*

- Should be the first to promote, organize and animate formation courses and meetings, in agreement with the major superiors and those responsible for formation.
- Recommend formators, religious and lay, who are suited for this special formation of the friars at all levels.
- Arrange for times of guided experiences, especially with the friars in temporary vows.
- In pastoral visits, try to have contacts with the religious houses of formation and give information on the life and commitment of the Secular Franciscans, in the Church and in society.

### *3. Religious formators*

- Should be able to show the young religious “the beauty of following Christ and the value of the charism”<sup>103</sup> they share with the SFO.
- Offer “opportunities to grow in their commitment to the charism and mission” of the Franciscan Family.<sup>104</sup>
- Be “very familiar with the path of seeking God,” undertaken together with the Secular Franciscans, “so as to be able to accompany others on this journey.”<sup>105</sup>

## 8.8. Methodological guidelines

### 1. *Experiential method*

- Use an experiential method at all levels. Integrate the formation programs with concrete experiences followed by guided reflection on these experiences.

### 2. *Collaboration on the part of the formators*

- The service of formation should be done as a team.
- Taking part in it should be formators and leaders of the SFO and of the other components of the Franciscan Family.
- There should be an exchange of ideas and teaching materials among formators of the same linguistic region, and also with those of other regions.

### 3. *Collaboration on the part of those being formed*

- Shared periods of time, at the various levels, with those being formed from the other components of the Franciscan Family.

### 4. *Formation at a distance*

- Make use of the methods of formation at a distance, through correspondence courses or networks for discussion and study together.
- Utilize the modern means of communication, which offer new opportunities for formation or collaboration in formation through e-mail and the Internet.

### 5. *Teaching materials*

- It should be the responsibility of the national and/or regional spiritual assistants to collect and constantly update material specifically for the formation of assistants with regard to the SFO, such as sources, documents, texts of the magisterium, manuals, lecture notes, historical evidence, periodicals, various publications, posters, brochures, videos, music cassettes, web pages etc.
- The materials should be made available to the educators and to the friars.
- If necessary, all aids that are needed but are non-existent or hard to find should be prepared.
- There should be fraternal collaboration not only among the different linguistic regions, but also with other geographical areas, especially with those that have a harder time finding materials and providing for their translation.

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<sup>103</sup> VC, 66.

<sup>104</sup> VC, 65.

<sup>105</sup> VC, 66.